

BUYING HELP

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or you're wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us to provide a more accurate advice.

Chris Finnermore

Our Labs Manager can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

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Sound Vegas options

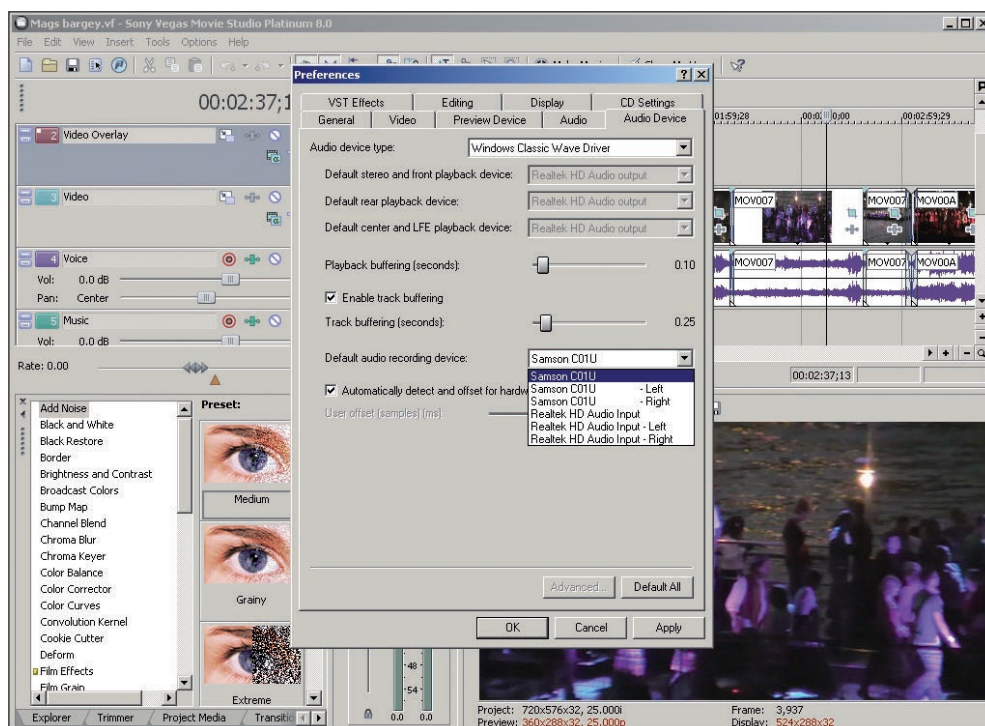
Q I do my film editing using Sony Vegas Movie Studio, and I have a Sound Blaster Live! 24-bit sound card. Can you suggest a suitable desktop microphone for voiceovers on my videos? My budget is up to £60.

Alex Bennett, via email

A Your best bet would be to use a higher-quality USB microphone. Amazon sells a Samson USB condenser microphone for £47 (visit <http://tinyurl.com/2fukjf> for details). A USB

microphone effectively has a sound card built in, so you'll need to set the microphone as your input source and your Sound Blaster as the output.

Vegas lets you use different sound cards for input and output. After installing the microphone, open Vegas and go to Preferences. Click the Audio Device tab and pick Windows Classic Wave Driver from the Audio device type box. If you have more than one sound card, make sure your preferred card is selected in the sound output drop-down boxes. Select your new microphone in the Default audio recording device box and click OK.



▲ Sony Vegas lets you select different sound cards for inputs and outputs, so you can use a USB microphone

Finding accessible storage

Q I am interested in buying a network-attached storage (NAS) device that I can attach to my Belkin F5D7632-4 wireless modem router and would give me secure access to the NAS from the internet. The specifications for some NAS boxes use vague terms such as "may also be connected to the internet". Does this mean I have to buy additional software or hardware, or does it have to be connected to a server that is connected to the internet? It only has to have around 80-150GB capacity, and I have a budget of around £100.

Gareth Williams, via email

A To make your files available on the internet you need a NAS with FTP access. If the NAS is connected to a home network that is plugged into an always-on internet connection, you'll be able to create an FTP connection to the

NAS and access your files. Unfortunately, such devices are beyond your budget. Synology makes a range of FTP-enabled NAS enclosures, the cheapest of which is the DiskStation 107e, costing £140 including VAT from www.storagedepot.co.uk. As it's just a NAS enclosure, you'll have to add your own SATA hard disk. The 107e isn't the fastest NAS in the world, but it has a fantastic specification. It can act as an FTP server, host websites and share media files over your home network.

If the DiskStation is too expensive for you, it's possible to make a cheap FTP server using an old PC and FreeNAS. As its name suggests, FreeNAS is a free operating system that turns a PC into a NAS server, complete with FTP access. You can download FreeNAS from www.freenas.org, and there's a guide to setting it up in *PC Builder*, *Shopper 224*, which is also on this month's cover CD.



◀ Synology's DiskStation DS107e lets you share files over your network and the internet

Higher resolution needed

Q I am interested in buying a 26in LCD TV, but the article in *Shopper 237* does not recommend a machine of this size that connects satisfactorily with a PC. I do not have room for a 32in TV, so can you recommend a 26in model that can display PC images at its native resolution of 1,366x768? Failing that, could a large monitor connect to my Humax PVR?

A P Dunn, via email

A Your Humax PVR doesn't have any PC-compatible outputs, so you won't be able to plug it into a normal computer monitor. You'll need an LCD TV, but these tend to be fussy when connecting to a TV. The 26in and 32in LCD TVs have native resolutions of 1,366x768 pixels, but often display only 1,024x768 pixels or 1,280x720 pixels when connected to a PC with a D-sub or HDMI cable.

A further, although minor, problem is that current PC graphics cards don't support 1,366 horizontal pixels; the most they can manage is 1,360. How this affects the picture quality depends on the TV. Some will put a three-pixel black bar down either side, while others will upscale the 1,360-pixel image to fit the display's native resolution. As it's only six pixels you would be hard pressed to notice any difference.

Only one LCD TV in our last TV Labs in *Shopper 237* could display 1,360x768 pixels, and then only over a D-sub and not an HDMI connection. Hitachi's L26H01U is £350 including VAT from www.empiredirect.co.uk. It has good picture quality when connected to a PC, but picture quality from an analogue TV source such as a DVD player or your Humax box is mediocre.



▲Hitachi's L26H01U isn't the best LCD TV we've seen, but it's good for connecting to a PC

Widescreen problem

Q I have a one-year-old Compaq Presario, and the seven-year-old monitor I use with it has started to malfunction. Most monitors are widescreen flat panels with 1,440x900 or 1,680x1,050 resolutions. Despite being so young, the onboard graphics on my machine do not support widescreen-aspect display modes. Can you recommend a cheap graphics card that supports the two resolutions above?

Ken Ebborn, via email

A Widescreen monitors are the most popular type available, as they're better for films and leave room for Vista's sidebar. It seems odd that your graphics card doesn't support widescreen resolutions. It's more likely Windows is hiding the resolutions that your normal-aspect monitor can't display. Windows detects the type of monitor you have plugged in and adjusts its resolution options accordingly. When you plug in your new monitor and reboot your PC, it will pick it up as a new widescreen monitor and let you select the right widescreen resolution in Display Settings.

If your card really can't display widescreen resolutions, buy a PCI Express Nvidia GeForce 6200 card for £21 from www.ebuyer.com.



▲ Your graphics card probably supports widescreen resolutions, even if Windows won't let you select them

New lease of life for PC

Q I have an HP Pavilion t850.uk system with a 200GB hard disk, an Intel P4 3.2GHz processor and an ATI Radeon X300SE 128MB graphics card. My operating system is Windows XP Home Edition Service Pack 2. My motherboard is, according to Sandra Lite, an Asus Puffer version 1.xx. It also has one 512MB memory module.

After reading your Labs article in *Shopper 239*, I decided to add some much-needed memory to my system. Then, as I was going to crack open the case, I wondered if I could go further and add a new graphics card, and possibly even a new processor if it will take dual core.

I would like to upgrade in order to speed up the system, play modern games and enjoy a dual-display setup with two standard monitors. I am also looking to upgrade to Windows Vista Home Premium some time soon.

Please can you suggest which way I should go? I am resigned to buying 2GB of RAM as a kit from Crucial but undecided on anything else, as I am not sure what will work with my motherboard. I have a budget of £300 for the upgrade, but anything left over will speed up my purchase of Windows Vista.

Tom Barnes, via email

A You have a reasonably modern PC, so you have a few upgrade options. The Asus Puffer's official name is the Asus PTGD1-LA, which has an Intel 915 chipset. This means you're limited to a single-core processor, as the first Intel chipset to support dual-core processors was the 945. The fastest single-core processor compatible with your chipset is Intel's 3.6GHz Pentium 4 661 processor, which is £60 including VAT from www.ebuyer.com. It's not that much faster than your current processor, so it probably isn't worth the upgrade, as your current one will be able to handle modern games.

Your motherboard takes DDR memory, so Crucial's 2GB DDR kit (part code CT2KIT12864Z40B) is the memory upgrade to buy. It costs £70 from www.crucial.com/uk. Upgrading to 2GB will make a big difference to your PC's performance, and is vital if you're upgrading to Vista.

Your motherboard has a PCI Express x16 slot, so your choice of graphics card is less limited. You can fit any modern graphics card, and your processor is powerful enough for all modern games. We'd recommend EVGA's GeForce 8800GTS 320MB, which is £200 from www.shop.bt.com. It's very fast in all current games and is DirectX 10-compatible, so you can enjoy all new games when you upgrade to Vista. The card needs its own six-pin PCI Express power plug, so if your power supply doesn't have one, you'll need to buy either a Molex-to-PCI Express converter (£4 from www.maplin.co.uk) or a new power supply.

As you're fitting a powerful graphics card, we'd recommend a high-quality power supply anyway. Hiper's Type M 530W, a powerful and stable PSU, is £42 from www.ebuyer.com. ☐

► EVGA's 8800GTS will give you huge gaming performance at a reasonable price

